

**USAID**



U.S. AGENCY FOR  
INTERNATIONAL  
DEVELOPMENT

## **Informed Choice and Informed Consent in the USAID International Family Planning Program**

Text of Message from USAID Administrator, J. Brian Atwood, to all USAID staff, May 14, 1998.

As many of you know, concerns have been raised regarding the adequacy of compliance with informed choice and informed consent procedures in a few countries where USAID works. Accordingly, I want to underscore the importance of informed choice as the cornerstone of USAID's family planning activities, and to remind USAID staff of the existing legislation and policies that must continue to be reflected in all of our relationships with host country and U.S. partners, including government partners, non- governmental organizations, grantees and contractors.

USAID's support for family planning service programs has been and continues to be based on two fundamental principles: voluntary participation and informed choice. This means that people are entitled to information that permits them to choose both whether they want to plan their families and, if so, the contraceptive method to use. These principles must underlie and guide the implementation of all USAID population programs and are fundamental to the long term success of our efforts. Informed consent is an important element of these principles, particularly in delivery of sterilization services.

In 1982, USAID issued PD-3, "Policy Guidelines on Voluntary Sterilization," which addresses the responsibilities of USAID in managing assistance for voluntary sterilization and stipulates that informed consent and information about other contraceptive methods be part of any program that includes sterilization. (USAID Policy Guidelines on Voluntary Sterilization, PD-3, included in USAID Policy Paper: Population Assistance, September 1982.) Informed consent involves the formal acknowledgement of consent, indicating that the client has not only consented to the procedure, but also understands the procedure and other options.

Moreover, Section 104(f)(2) of the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961 states: "None of the funds made available to carry out this part may be used to pay for the performance of involuntary sterilizations as a method of family planning or to coerce or provide any financial incentive to any person to undergo sterilizations."

All decisions on the use of family planning methods by individual women and men must be voluntary and based on provision of full information concerning the different contraceptive methods available in the country. For sterilization services, the policy guidelines of PD-3 are operationalized in the standard provisions included in all USAID population assistance agreements and subagreements. It is essential to ensure effective compliance with informed consent requirements, including close monitoring of USAID-funded programs, both as a fundamental element of quality of care, and as evidence that USAID and the programs it supports are adhering to statutorily-mandated, voluntary participation requirements.

It is USAID policy not to support any program in which there is any element of coercion, explicit or implicit, of individuals to practice family planning or to accept any particular method of contraception. "An individual's consent is considered voluntary if it is based upon the exercise of free choice and is not obtained by any special inducements or any element of force, fraud, deceit, duress or other forms of coercion or misrepresentation (1982 PD-3 Policy Guidance)." Accordingly, while national programs of our host-country government partners may set overall goals for contraceptive use for planning purposes, performance-based quotas or targets should not be set for sterilization or for any particular family planning method. Such quotas or targets potentially conflict with an individual's free choice. These principles of voluntary participation and informed consent are even more vital when sterilization is provided, because it is a permanent method.

It is essential that these principles of voluntary participation and informed choice be reflected and advanced in all the programs supported by USAID and in discussions with host country partners. In the event that host government policies or activities conflict with these principles or USAID policy, missions should actively work with host country partners to change these policies or activities, as well as distance USAID from them. Missions should advise USAID/W (G, PPC and regional bureau) of any such issues as they arise and recommend steps to resolve the conflict, even if USAID is not directly supporting the affected programs.

Voluntary participation and informed choice are critical elements of sustainable, successful family planning programs, and remain fundamental to the mission and policies of USAID. We must work together with our host country partners to ensure that these principles continue to be the foundation of family planning programs throughout the world.